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ABSTRACT

A review of the literature of kindergarten reading instruction reveals that while a number of experimental research studies involving early reading have been conducted, very few describing actual classroom practices have been undertaken. An examination of the findings from such studies conducted in Kansas, Wisconsin, New York, a south-central state, and in 13 large cities indicates the following: the majority of kindergarten teachers support informal reading programs; teacher instructional reading practices often conflict with research evidence, teacher-stated educational philosophy, and expert opinion; kindergarten teachers agree that the teaching of reading to kindergarten children is possible; and further research is needed relevant to methods, materials, target children, and the longitudinal effects of kindergarten reading instruction. (FL)

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The Teaching of Reading in the Kindergarten: State of the Art Review

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Since 1960 hundreds of articles have appeared in professional journals relevant to prereading skills, early readers, beginning reading, and reading in the kindergarten. The primary purpose of this paper is to review the literature of U.S. kindergarten reading instruction to determine current practices.

Many of the papers written about beginning reading are of the nature of (a) opinions about whether or not to teach reading in the kindergarten, (b) reports of the effectiveness of various compensatory prereading programs, (c) experimental projects which compare effective-

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ness of various reading programs with that of the traditional readiness program, or (d) assessment of reading readiness factors. The studies reviewed in the paper are those relevant to the current kindergarten reading and prereading instructional practices of the 1970's.

The controversy surrounding modern kindergarten reading instruction has its roots in the past. The traditional kindergarten of earlier decades had as its purpose development of readiness and socialization of the child. Traditional kindergarten readiness programs were defined in terms of oral language development. In some states public kindergartens were legally restrained from dealing with formal reading instruction. Children were to be given readiness training, but were not to work with aspects of the printed word.

The problem of whether or not to teach reading in the kindergarten is no longer an issue. Based on the results of studies by Durkin (1970) and others it appears clear that kindergarten children can learn to read. Generally no negative results have been attributed to kindergarten reading instruction with one possible exception. Kelley and Chen (1967) found less favorable attitudes toward school and reading by children in a formal reading instruction program versus children in a readiness program. Research studies indicate that kindergarten teachers do not dispute the fact that preschool children can learn to read (La Conte, 1969; Zaruba, 1967). The point of contention is how to teach reading to kindergarten children and which children to teach (Lesiak, 1978). Most kindergarten teachers advo-

cate informal reading instruction to those children who are ready. While the teachers advocate informal instruction, La Conte (1970) found that over one-third of the kindergarten teachers were teaching some reading skills and using some reading materials.

It appears that a number of people are of the opinion that today's children are cognitively different from those children entering school a decade or more ago. Changes in cognitive skills--higher levels of verbal development, etc.--are often attributed to television viewing or preschool educational programs. If indeed preschool children have made cognitive advances then the implication would seem to be that traditional kindergarten programs should reflect that change in their programs. Are children of today further advanced academically such that formal reading skills should be taught in the kindergarten? If so, how should the skills be taught? What might be the long-range effects on reading skill acquisition and attitude toward reading and school if skills are formally taught in kindergarten? According to Scott (1975) findings based on research using the Tests of Primary Mental Abilities indicate that children are entering first grade with greater competencies in understanding language, perceiving visual similarities and differences, and comprehending number concepts than a decade earlier. What are the implications of these findings for beginning reading instruction?

In reviewing the literature of kindergarten reading instruction, one fact that becomes evident is the realization that although many

talk about reading in the kindergarten, little current research is available relevant to what is actually occurring in the classroom.

In 1972 Vukelich and Beattie made a review of recent studies to determine whether the trend to teach reading in kindergarten had a basis in research evidence. Following an examination of the experimental studies, Vukelich and Beattie decided that no conclusions could be formulated on the basis of the studies reviewed. The reports of the studies had failed to define terms or adequately describe the training program of control subject children. Studies reviewed generally fell into the categories of descriptions of prereading achievement of children who experienced reading readiness workbooks or descriptions of reading achievement of children who experienced formal reading sessions as opposed to children who experienced none.

Since the Vukelich and Beattie review, a number of experimental research studies involving early reading have been done. Few studies, however, describe current classroom practices. Sheridan (1972) attempted to compare the actual teacher reported practices in reading readiness programs in the kindergartens and first grades of New York State public schools with the practices advocated by chairpersons of early childhood and elementary education departments in New York State teacher-training institutions. Sheridan's findings indicated a descrepancy between practices reported by teachers and those advocated by directors or chairpersons of early childhood education programs in the state. Less than one-fourth of the kindergarten teachers

provided systematic reading instruction for kindergarten children with some reading ability, although this was advocated by three-fourths of the chairpersons. Two-thirds of the teachers advocated formal alphabet instruction while only one-third of the directors agreed. More than one-third of the teachers reported intensified reading readiness instruction for the entire class but only nine percent of the directors advocated this. A slight majority of the kindergarten teachers utilized reading readiness workbooks while only one-sixth of the chairpersons advocated this practice. Generally, Sheridan's research found whole class reading readiness programs which employed reading workbooks to be the major trend with little systematic reading instruction provided for children who entered kindergarten with some reading ability. Ross (1974) in a similar study examined the reading readiness practices employed by selected kindergarten and first grade teachers. The Ross study concluded that there was a need to examine classroom practices and materials in the light of research findings.

Davis (1970) made a status study of kindergartens in Kansas. Among the facts reported which are relevant to kindergarten reading were the following: (a) the majority of kindergarten teachers in small and medium size school districts used reading readiness workbooks with their classes; (b) handwriting activities were regularly engaged in by the majority of small and medium size school districts and by almost half the large districts; (c) large districts tended to use readiness workbooks less than the small and medium size school

districts. Other direct or formal reading activities were not identified among those activities engaged in daily or regularly according to the Kansas kindergarten status study.

Bates (1976) did a descriptive study of the teaching of reading readiness and reading in Wisconsin public school kindergartens. Of the teachers sampled, Bates found that 98% included reading readiness development in their curriculum while 38% included reading. Most reading readiness programs involved the entire class and began near the start of the school year. Reading instruction was generally begun the second half of the school year and was given by the majority of kindergarten teachers to those children whom they deemed ready. Bates concluded that there was a need for kindergarten teacher training relevant to reading instruction.

A different approach to the probem of ascertaining the status of kindergarten reading instruction was taken by Wilson (1976). Wilson studied and analyzed the kindergarten curriculum guides of 13 large cities to detect trends in reading instruction. The findings indicated that there was a trend toward reading instruction in the kindergarten with only two cities favoring delay. The majority of the cities defined reading readiness in terms of oral language development, a traditional view, although their guides emphasized a more contemporary view of reading instruction including the usage of specific commercial reading programs. Conspicuous by their absence from the guides were provisions for necessary materials for early reading in-

struction such as writing materials and easy to read books, and adjustments to later school programs based on early reading experiences. Confusion between the oral language definition of reading and the approach to beginning reading instruction in kindergarten was evidenced.

A recent research study in the field of kindergarten reading by Mason is worthy of note (1977). Based on experiments, Mason concluded that children have an appreciable knowledge of printed words and letters and ways to recognize words before formal reading instruction begins and that there is a hierarchy for reading readiness as evidenced by the uniformity of sequence in acquiring reading readiness knowledge. Implications of these findings for kindergarten programs are disucssed.

To further access current kindergarten classroom instructional reading practices for this paper, a research survey was conducted in a south-central state. Questionnaires were sent to a random sample of ten percent of the school districts in the state. Seventy-eight percent of the questionnaires were returned. Of the teachers completing the questionnaire, 76% were opposed to formal reading in the kindergarten. However, the majority of teachers reported teaching phonics skills, handwriting, and sight words. The majority of kindergarten teachers also utilized commercial duplicated readiness materials, teacher-made worksheets and ability grouping for instruction.

Based on a review of the recent research of kindergarten class-

room reading instructional practices, the following conclusions are reached: (a) the majority of kindergarten teachers voice support of informal reading programs; (b) teacher instructional reading practices often conflict with research evidence, teacher stated educational philosophy, and expert opinion; (c) kindergarten teachers agree that the teaching of reading to kindergarten children is possible; (d) research is needed relevant to methods, materials, target children, and longitudinal effects of kindergarten reading instruction. Ollika (1977) has stated the need for the kindergarten reading program to be one which is enjoyable. Experimentation is needed to devise a diverse range of kinds of kindergarten reading experiences that provide for individual differences and permit optimum acquisition of reading skill while building the lifetime reading habit.

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ABSTRACT

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The literature of kindergarten reading instructional practices of the 1970's is reviewed. A paucity of research exists relevant to current classroom kindergarten reading practices. A number of studies are available which describe experimental kindergarten projects or assessment of reading readiness. Findings of a study conducted by the author relevant to kindergarten teacher practices in a south-central state are reported. Based on the review of the literature, it is concluded that the majority of kindergarten teachers favor informal reading instruction and that reading instruction is being provided in most kindergartens. Instructional practices often conflict with research evidence, expert opinion and teacher-stated educational philosophy.